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RUEHVI/AMEMBASSY VIENNA PRIORITY 0135

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000282

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FOR NEA/FO - GRAY; NEA/MAG - HOPKINS AND HARRIS
NSC FOR YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2018
TAGS: [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN AMBASSADOR HAS LITTLE INFORMATION ON
KIDNAPPING

REF: A. ALGIERS 318

[1](#)B. TUNIS 235
[1](#)C. TUNIS 227

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) In a March 18 meeting, Austrian Ambassador Johann Froehlich told the Ambassador that he has been in close contact with the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the kidnapping of two Austrian citizens by Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, reftels). However, Froehlich said he had little information from Vienna about the latest efforts regarding the hostages. Further, while he understood Austrian FM Plassnik had asked the GOT for "one thing" in a phone conversation with FM Abdallah, Froehlich said he had not been informed what was requested. He added that most of the limited information he has about the issue comes from the international media, noting that the Tunisian press has been largely devoid of information about the kidnapping. Regarding AQIM demands for the release of Tunisian al-Qaeda members, Froehlich said he did not know if Austria had discussed this matter with the GOT, but that such a request "would be impossible for me."

[1](#)2. (C) Froehlich told the Ambassador that his requests to meet with the Tunisian Ministers of Interior and Defense had not yet been granted, and that the MFA Director General for Europe Mongi Lahbib had said he was the GOT POC on the matter. Froehlich said all parties agree that the two tourists were last in Tunisia and had not registered their itinerary with the GOT as is standard practice. While the GOT has not admitted the two were kidnapped in Tunisia, Froehlich had been assured by Lahbib and Minister of Tourism Khelil Lajimi that the GOT had conducted a thorough search of the desert regions south of Chott El Jerid and had found no evidence of the missing tourists. At this point, Froehlich said it appears that the two Austrians are likely in Mali.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador conveyed to Froehlich the USG's concern for the welfare of the two Austrians and offered US support. Further, he told Froehlich that he had made the same offer on March 14 to Tunisian Minister of State and Presidential Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia. Froehlich said he appreciated the US offer of assistance and that other European countries had also been supportive. He concluded that terrorism in the region is a problem that will continue as long as there is public support for terrorist acts.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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